

Dido and Aeneas in Roman Britain

Kathryn Thompson and Zahra Newby

When we think of Dido we think of Virgil's *Aeneid*. And so did the Romans – even those who lived in Britain. Kathryn Thompson and Zahra Newby take a look here at how one Somerset villa-owner had a mosaic laid that enabled him both to show his literary taste and to emphasize the delights of his baths.

Virgil's Dido

Let the Trojan who knows no pity gaze his fill upon this fire from the high seas and take with him the omen of my death.
(*Aeneid* 4.661–2; trans. David West)

These are the words of Dido, the woman who fell in love with a man who could never be hers, moments before she took her own life. Virgil's version of a betrayed and tragic queen was revisited by Ovid in his *Heroides*, and later became a popular theme for post-Renaissance art and opera. But what happened to her story in Roman art?

Although she features in a couple of Pompeian paintings and an unusual Roman sarcophagus, Dido never became a popular subject in Roman art. That makes it all the more surprising, and interesting, when we find her represented in Roman Britain. Here we take a closer look at a fourth-century A.D. mosaic from Roman Britain which retells Dido's tale with a twist: Virgil's love story is used to flaunt the literary credentials of the owner, but also reworked to exhibit the power of Venus and the sensuous delights of the Roman baths.

Setting up the story at Low Ham

The story of Dido and Aeneas is depicted on a mosaic from the bathhouse of a Roman villa found in the village of Low Ham in Somerset. The mosaic was found in the *frigidarium*, providing an ornate floor which one would have had to cross to descend into the cold plunge pool. 13 feet square, it was divided into 5 panels, which collectively retold the story of Dido and Aeneas as recounted in *Aeneid* books 1 and 4.

The sequence of panels in the mosaic

follows the overall narrative order of the *Aeneid* but refigures it to suit this specific context. Moving anti-clockwise the first long panel (to the left of the entrance) shows Aeneas' companion, Achates, taking from the Trojan ships a crown, reminiscent of the 'double gold coronet set with jewels' given as a gift to Dido in *Aeneid* 1; the next scene, facing the viewer as they enter the *frigidarium*, shows Aeneas, his young son Ascanius, Venus, and Queen Dido. To the right of this, a second long panel depicts the hunt. Finally the mosaic culminates at the steps which descend into the plunge pool in the scene of Dido and Aeneas embracing. In the centre of the tableau Venus stands commandingly as if ready for the bath, flanked by two cupids.

The orientation of the figures reflects the viewer's movement around the room: the figure of Achates in the ships scene is placed at right angles to the rest of the figures in this panel, visually leading us on to the next scene which is oriented towards a person entering the room. On the opposite side, both the embrace scene and Venus are clearly designed to be viewed by a person emerging from the plunge pool. Different visual devices are used to stress particular aspects of the myth; this famous story was manipulated not only to suit its bathhouse setting, but to enrich, stimulate, and even inspire the atmosphere of that setting.

Putting Venus centre stage

This visual retelling of the *Aeneid* focuses on Venus' power and the erotic attraction between Dido and Aeneas. According to Virgil in *Aeneid* 1, Venus sent her son, Cupid, disguised as the boy Ascanius, as a ruse to inflame Dido with love for Aeneas. The mosaic alludes to this in the panel at the room's entranceway: Venus

tenderly puts her arm around Ascanius and caresses his shoulder, the body language and interaction between Venus and 'Ascanius'/Cupid pointing to the reality of their relationship. With one hand on 'Ascanius', Venus' other hand is behind Dido, as she cunningly draws the two figures towards one another. From this very first image the bather sees that Venus' might as a goddess, and the intrigue by which she brings about her will, are at the forefront of this interpretation of the *Aeneid*.

Dido and Aeneas gaze at each other, suitably oblivious to the divine machinations whirring around them. This eye contact insinuates the growing love between them, which itself builds throughout the course of the mosaic narrative. In Virgil's account the love between the two is engineered by divine powers: Aeneas had no intention of wooing Dido when he was washed up on her shores, and, until she fell under Cupid's spell, Dido merely offered Aeneas amicable assistance. Yet the rendering of their tale at Low Ham reveals the tender phases of coquetry and desire, making the episode into a suitable homage to the goddess who presided over the baths.

The careful incorporation of eye contact between Dido and Aeneas occurs again in the hunt scene (above), where Aeneas twists his head around to gaze at Dido riding behind him. At the front of the vignette, as related in *Aeneid* book 4, Ascanius canters gleefully, unaware of the flirtation going on behind. His absorption in the hunt emphasizes even more starkly his father's yearning for the queen. Here Aeneas is as smitten with Dido as she is with him, and the mosaicist presents a story that is markedly different from Virgil's, celebrating the anticipation, energy, and thrill of romantic love – a kind of love that plays no part in the *Aeneid*.

At Low Ham Dido's exotic clothing is made to convey her heightened sensuality. In the hunt she rides naked except for a cloak, which billows loosely around her, and hunting boots, which rise up her calf. Whilst her costume echoes both Virgil's description of Dido's attire in the hunt, in *Aeneid* book 4, and the disguise as a Tyrian huntress which Venus adopts in *Aeneid* book 1, the rendering also accentuates

Dido's sexual appeal: her cloak curls insouciantly around her, tantalizingly drawing attention to her naked flesh. Dido is presented here in a highly sexualized manner, her foreignness enhanced and manipulated.

Dido's eroticism is especially stressed in the final scene, of Dido and Aeneas embracing, positioned next to the steps leading into the cold plunge pool. Dido's cloak swirls seductively around her, emphasizing her figure and mimicking the embrace she shares with Aeneas. The trees on either side of the couple, swaying in dynamic illustration of the storm, echo Dido's sensual curves. Here the eye contact between Aeneas and Dido reaches its climax, as the lovers gaze intensely into each other's eyes, only inches apart.

By this point, we might have expected the goddess Juno to make an appearance. In Virgil's account in *Aeneid* book 4, Juno collaborated with Venus to bring about a strange pseudo-marriage for Dido and Aeneas when they sheltered from the storm in a cave. Yet Juno and her contribution have been omitted at Low Ham in order to centralize Venus in the whole affair. The Low Ham version of the tale also makes no mention of the tragic ending to Dido and Aeneas' love story. The mosaic's narrative climaxes at the part of Virgil's tale which lends itself most readily to an emphatic finale of Venus' power, and the panel which conveyed this finale was shrewdly positioned in the place where bathers metaphorically yielded themselves to Venus and descended into the pool. In this way the mosaic conversed with its setting to situate the Dido and Aeneas episode under the sign of Venus.

Love and literature in the baths

It is entirely appropriate that the mosaic should reframe Virgil's story of Dido and Aeneas into an encomium of the goddess Venus, since Venus was particularly associated with the baths, as we see from her frequent appearance there in statuary form. The association between the different pleasures of the flesh is made especially clear in an epitaph from Rome, commemorating one Tiberius Claudius Secundus. Here '*balnea, vina, Venus*', 'Baths, wine, and Venus/sex', are linked together as pleasures which corrupt the body, but form the basis of life. Rather than simply representing the goddess in sculptural form, the Low Ham mosaic visualizes a famous story from a literary text to serve as proof of Venus' power. Venus herself stands in the centre of the mosaic, proudly asserting her power and sensuality.

Yet in this celebration of the goddess Venus, the literary 'Steps' rappings of the tale of Dido and Aeneas are certainly not

lost. Through his choice of an episode from Virgil's epic to decorate his bathhouse, the owner of the Low Ham villa also conveyed his intellectual prowess. Virgil's *Aeneid* was a canonical text in the world of Late Antiquity, and knowledge of it placed the owner as a member of the educated elite. Elsewhere in Roman Britain, in a villa at Lullingstone in Kent, we find an allusion to *Aeneid* book 1 in a Latin elegiac couplet accompanying an image of Europa riding the bull. There, the language of the elegiac poet Ovid is used to draw an episode from Greek mythology into the frame of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Here too we find inventive engagement with the literary tradition, in a mosaic retelling a story from Virgil's *Aeneid* for the purposes of setting-specific domestic decoration and elite self-representation.

The sultry take on the relationship between Dido and Aeneas, the prevalent use of romantic symbolism, the marked abridgements to Virgil's story, and the fact that, in the very centre of mosaic, Venus presides over the whole tableau, powerfully affirm that the Low Ham mosaic is decisively concerned with the power of Venus and her empire of love and pleasure. The visual language of this mosaic transformed the tragic queen of Virgil's epic into a symbol of carefree sensuality. The Low Ham mosaic demonstrates that it was possible to make reference to a canonical text while at the same time reworking it for particular ends. Visual images do not necessarily illustrate literary texts, they engage with them in complex and innovative ways, producing new works of art tailored towards the needs and desires of their patrons and viewers.

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